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**New Approaches to Multicultural Liturgy**



# Multiculturalism, Inculturation, and God's Transforming Grace

By JOHN FLAHERTY

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**T**he Catholic community of St. Gregory is a suburban parish built and, for many years, inhabited primarily by the sons and daughters of first-generation immigrants—people who came to this country many decades ago dreaming of a better life for their children. Parish life at St. Gregory began in earnest some seventy-five years ago, when the parish school was bursting at the seams with students and the classrooms were all staffed by nuns. But now, of the once numerous women religious who taught here, only one remains as the elementary school principal, though the classrooms are still full.

Many children of those first immigrant families have celebrated all the sacramental turns in their life at St. Gregory and have witnessed their own children grow to adulthood and raise their families in the parish. In fact, the parish council consists of these pillars of the community. For many people across several generations, the rhythm of family life has been synonymous with parish life at St. Gregory.

Several men and women religious working in other parishes can trace their lineage, rich with fond memories, to St. Gregory. The Holy Name Society, the Boy Scouts, the Altar Society, Knights of Columbus, the Choristers Guild, Bingo, and the Women's Sodality—all these organizations filled the parish hall with meetings and events both day and evening. A few of the groups continue to grow and thrive while others have faded, their glory days recalled by a few older parishioners. Pictures, portraits, and plaques of another time line the walls of the buildings.

Neighborhoods change though, and people move away to where there are newer homes, more stores, and better neighborhoods. New waves and generations of proud, hard-working immigrants with their own customs, music, foods, practices, devotions, and tastes move into neighborhoods once populated by the sons and daughters of the immigrants of another time.

At St. Gregory, the most recent immigrant community, wishing to celebrate Mass in its own language and with its own music, has been given the least desirable time on

Sunday—3:00 PM—to celebrate the Eucharist. Even at this time, the hottest time of the day in summer, the church is filled well beyond capacity. This community exists essentially as a parallel community to the older and majority group that constitutes and runs the parish. It operates on the grounds of St. Gregory disconnected from the official structure of the parish.

But in an attempt to be genuinely inclusive and hospitable, the established parish music ministry leadership invites three leaders from the newly formed immigrant choir to a music committee meeting so that a collaborative process might begin. Cordial pleasantries are exchanged. The long-term members of the committee know instinctively where each person's place is at the meeting table, and they move immediately to their places; after all, they're

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part of a group that has been operating for decades. The guests, unsure of their place at this meeting, are shown to their chairs. Even though their command of the dominant language is functional, the guests are embarrassed and intimidated that they are not more casually at home in the language or the expectations of this group; this helps to make communication difficult. The chair of the liturgy committee makes the appropriate introductions, and the customary printed agenda (printed in the dominant language) is passed to all at the table. At an appropriate time, the chair invites all at the table to introduce themselves. (This gesture is, of course, for the guests. The others at the table know one another and have heard these introductions and self-aggrandizements many, many times over the years.) The guests struggle to understand and remember what is said and by whom and what each person's significance is on this committee.

The next part of the process at this committee meeting begins the earnest and well-intentioned attempt at collaboration. The chair informs the guests that the committee has decided that it would be nice to work

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together on all things musical and liturgical. Coded vocabulary — liturgese — is bantered about the meeting table to suggest the theological, musical, and pastoral formation of those who are in power and their skill at applying that formation to practical issues. It also serves to define class and status at this table. The three guests struggle to understand both the vernacular language and the liturgical vocabulary, recognizing in the process that this struggle shows that they are not formally trained musicians. They haven't had the time to learn to read printed notes on pages because they work twelve-hour days eking out a living at minimum or substandard wages. The chair tells these three music ministers that the committee would like the immigrant choir to sing the *Gloria*, offertory hymn, and the Lamb of God at the next major parish liturgy. In making this announcement, the chair notes that this would be a wonderful example of collaboration. Of course, the chair makes clear, the "parish choir" will handle music for the rest of the liturgy. In other words, the "parish choir" won't be singing the *Gloria*, offertory, and Lamb of God with the immigrant choir, and the immigrant choir needn't worry about leading the other parts of the liturgy. Still, all members of both choirs will be together in the choir loft, and, after all, that's what's most important.

What transpires after this meeting should be predictable, yet it befuddles the musical establishment of the parish. The chair of the music committee and the parish music director are frustrated and angry that the immigrant choir doesn't come to the planned liturgy and that no explanation or apology is offered after the fact. Hands are thrown up and washed of any further attempts at collaboration. After all, they reason, the attempt was made and "they" just wouldn't participate.

The dynamics of what happened are complex yet obvious. The guests:

- Were not conversant in the vernacular, spoken language.
- Were told, not asked, how they would participate.
- Were shown to their seats at the meeting after everyone else had claimed their "regular" places.
- Felt intimidated because they could not "read" music.
- Were befuddled by the "liturgyspeak."
- Were never asked about their desires and dreams for their families, their ministries, and worship.
- Were told in no uncertain terms that they would not be "mixing" with those of the power class of the parish when praying in song.

### Tokenism or Inculturation?

This is an example of multiculturalism that amounts to tokenism and patronization, and it is an example that is repeated all too often. This model stands in stark contrast to a multicultural approach that amounts to inculturation. An inculturated approach to a multicultural situation



A dancer performs during the liturgy at a multicultural celebration in the Diocese of Oakland, California. Photo courtesy of Christian Hadidjaja.

makes the statement that the worshipping body of Christ is defined as that group of believers that occupies an appointed time and space in union with all the angels and saints in their unending hymn of praise. In other words, we sing and pray together always, and we learn from each other. This should be true particularly of all the parish's music ministers. Those of us who know how to sight read music, for example, are challenged by this vision of a united church at worship to learn the oral tradition from those who cannot read, and those who are challenged by their lack of musical training should seek help from those who have the benefit of such education. At times, we need to surrender what we may think is the most important aspect of ministry so that the collective body might have life.

In the parishes of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Sunday Eucharist is celebrated — and sung — in no fewer than forty-five languages. Each weekly celebration is rich with its own unique cultural repository of music, art, and ritual action emanating from the Roman Rite. In the variety of its celebrations, Los Angeles is not unique; the same can be said to some degree of every diocese in the world. To be certain, language is not the whole of a culture, but it is an important aspect that must be dealt with in working with people of many different cultural experiences. Often,

however, “culture” tends to be identified as something that only newly arrived immigrants bring to the table, when in reality every one of us is steeped in cultural expectations, attitudes, and ways of being that may differ from those around us.

When we gather as an archdiocese, we have two choices. One is the multicultural model described in the story about St. Gregory Parish’s failed attempt to bridge the cultural divide through tokenism and patronization. It leaves the body of Christ more disjointed, fractured, and fragmented than when it initially gathered for Eucharist. Another approach is the model of inculturation, which invites all to participate actively in a communal experience. Inculturation requires much more work, energy, and personal investment. Token multicultural elements are much easier to achieve.

Of course, honest attempts to bridge cultural divides through multiculturalism are an important developmental step in beginning a dialogue between groups of peoples, but it will not achieve what liturgy was ever intended to be in practice. In the paradigm of multiculturalism, “I watch what you do undiluted by my participation, and you experience what I do without your involvement.” In this model there are spectators, and there are performers, and this is how the Easter Triduum plays itself out in many parishes.

St. Ambrose of Milan, at the end of the fourth century, offered St. Augustine some advice that reflects an approach to liturgical practice that respects the traditions of every place and does not put one form of liturgical culture above another. His advice has come down to us as “when in Rome, do as the Romans do,” but that’s only half of what Ambrose had to say. He actually told Augustine: “If you are at Rome, live in the Roman style; if you are elsewhere, live as they live elsewhere.” (The original Latin is: “*Si fueris Romae, Romano vivito more; si fueris alibi, vivito sicut ibi.*”) He also told Augustine: “When I am at Rome, I fast as the Romans do; when I am at Milan, I do not fast. So likewise you, whatever church you come to, observe the custom of the place, if you would neither give offence to others nor take offence from them.” The model of inculturation, then, never begins with what might be considered a pure, undiluted cultural or musical experience against which all others are to be judged because all are invited to participate actively in the prayer. In practice, then, we all sing together on all the assembly parts and responses, whether or not we are experts in Latin, Spanish, English, Vietnamese, or any other language or music. We all participate whether or not we are vocalists, organists, guitarists or flutists.

With regard specifically to music, this is the challenge that lies at feet of the maestro: to take all of these wonderfully diverse pieces and peoples and weave them all into a tapestry so that all retain their unique integrity while revealing a prayer experience whose sum is much, much greater than any of the individual pieces—a prayer experience that transcends the obvious, and is in fact, transcendental and transformational.

## Asian and Pacific Catholics in the United States

*An excerpt from the USCCB 2001 statement Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith © 2001 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Website: <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/harmony.shtml#ii>.*

Except for the Filipinos, the majority of Asian and Pacific people in the United States are followers of Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam. Asian and Pacific Catholics have been present in the Church in the United States since the beginning. The presence of Eastern Catholics in the United States is primarily the result of late nineteenth-century migration from Eastern Europe and the turmoil and upheaval in the Middle East in the opening decades of the twentieth century. . . .

Today the number of Asian and Pacific Catholics in the United States presents a difficult and complex question. . . .

One way to estimate the number of Asian and Pacific Catholics in this country is to look at the percentages of Catholics in their homelands. These percentages range from 8 percent in Korea to 85 percent in East Timor . . . . While the percentages are small, the numbers may be large—for example, less than one percent in China are Catholic, but this percentage represents about ten million Catholics. It is also worth noting that the Philippines is home to the third largest Catholic population in the world, after Brazil and Mexico.

Today the Catholic Church in Korea exhibits the highest annual adult baptism rate in the world, a trend also true among Korean Americans. Korean Catholics have a strong sense of mission, sending missionaries to various parts of the world.

Vietnamese Catholics in the United States—who have blessed the Church in the United States with many priests and religious—are estimated to number 300,000, or 30 percent of Vietnamese Americans. The percentage of Catholics in Vietnam, however, is only 8 percent because many Catholics left Vietnam as refugees during the war.

Pacific Islanders have a high percentage of Catholics in the homelands. Samoans are 22 percent Catholic, while in the Marianas 84 percent are Catholic.

Many Asian and Pacific Islanders—native-born and immigrants—belong to the Eastern Catholic churches. Accurate figures for the number of Eastern Catholics originating in Asia are likewise difficult to determine. It is estimated that there are 500,000 faithful from the Armenian, Chaldean, Maronite, Melkite, and Syriac churches, which include Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara, in the United States.

While the number of Asian and Pacific Catholics as a percentage of U.S. Catholics may be small, many Asian and Pacific Islander non-Catholics have attended Catholic schools and have been the recipients of services offered by the numerous and well-respected social



programs conducted by local churches, Caritas, and other international Catholic organizations in their countries of origin. In Hong Kong, for instance, one-third of the children graduate each year from Catholic schools. In other countries, Catholic schools are the preferred institutions of learning. . . . Because the graduates of these educational systems carry a great deal of influence, it is important for evangelization and outreach to continue the ties that have already been established. The challenge in the United States is then to strengthen that Catholic connection.

## Moving toward Inculturation

Though we may at times feel disempowered and disconnected, subject to the whims of those who do the hiring and firing, pastoral musicians truly have opportunities to shape how liturgy is celebrated in the multicultural environment that is growing in the United States today. We can play a significant role in determining how our communities will do that which is most important through our openness to changing, adapting, learning, and experiencing new thoughts and ways of worship. To do this we have to abandon former approaches to new people in our community, and we do this by putting more stock in relationships than in institutions.

Inculturation requires that we become something new—a new creation—because we have extended ourselves to another. Here are a few ways to move beyond tokenism and toward the kind of respect for each other that Ambrose proposed to Augustine—an approach that I am calling inculturation.

**Share Meals.** The Eucharistic table is where we gather as a community, but we may depend far too much on this one weekly gathering to do that which we may not be doing Monday through Saturday. We must take more responsibility for building up our parish communities around shared meals so that our sharing in the one bread and the one cup will bring to fulfillment what we have been practicing day by day.

Before we ever sit down to plan worship together, in other words, we must take time to share meals. (And I don't mean take-out food picked up just prior to the liturgy or music planning meeting.) As parish leaders and music directors, we must gather all those who love and sing sacred music to share meals together—the Spanish choir, adult choir, schola sanctorum, youth choir, children's choir, traditional choir, Gospel choir, Vietnamese choir, *juvenes* choir, contemporary choir, 10:30 Mass choir, and so on. Take time to make home-cooked meals and share them. Have a potluck lunch or supper. Have a picnic. Have a barbeque. Ask everyone to bring some food of his or her culture. We cannot hope to break down walls and begin to collaborate without this fundamental action. Jesus knew that meal sharing and table fellowship were the way to open human hearts.

A few ground rules when planning your gathering: No Jell-O or fast food. Ask your parish priest, deacon, or pastoral associate to offer a prayer of thanksgiving in as many languages as necessary. Begin in the language(s) of those who hold the least political power in the parish; it's a good gesture of hospitality. Bring instruments—share and teach some music—folk, sacred, secular. Encourage everyone to sit with folks they don't know when eating. Before leaving, tentatively plan your next social gathering. If you're having a picnic, bring games popular to your culture. Teach others these games. (Believe it or not, most of the world thinks of soccer when most Americans say the word, "football.")

**Spend time working together.** Once you've spent some social time with one another, spend time planning, composing, singing, playing, rehearsing, and working together. Realize that when different peoples gather for a meeting, this can tend to mean as many different things as there are cultures. Be flexible in how you initiate and facilitate these gatherings. The rule of listening more than you speak produces greater results than pushing one's own agenda. Some groups work linearly and are strictly task-oriented, while for others the process is much more circular. For these groups, it is as much about the process as it is about the result (or the process is the result). A



synthesis of these two models can often produce a greater sum than the individual parts. In some cultures, “saving face” and keeping the tribe intact is of greater value than publicly disagreeing. In others, publicly expressed divergent views are not only welcome but also encouraged. Sensitivity is the key to success in this arena.

**Play music together—secular as well as sacred.** We can learn much from each other by listening to the songs handed down from those who taught and inspired us. We can learn much by listening to another tell a story that is wrapped around a childhood memory of a hymn or song.

Some years ago, Brother Rufino Zaragoza, OFM, and I were searching for a Catholic Vietnamese song that could be translated into English. While conducting this research, I shared the melody of a liturgical song that is well known to Vietnamese Catholics with Kim, the lady who has cut my hair for the past fifteen years. I was aware that she was a Vietnamese immigrant, married to another Vietnamese immigrant, and that she was Catholic. When I sang this melody to her, in the middle of her salon, she

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began to sob inconsolably. After fifteen years of knowing a bit about each other, she finally shared her story with me. She had fled Vietnam when she was sixteen years old, having shaved her head so that she might pass as a male. Boarding a boat that was barely seaworthy, she was tucked in between her brother and uncle so that she wouldn’t be raped and murdered. She waved goodbye forever to her mother and father as they waved from the shore of a war-ravaged land. Her mother had sung her to sleep with this song when she was a little girl. Affirmed by Kim’s story, Rufino and I selected this piece of music, entitled “Boundless Love,” which speaks of a God who loves us beyond all understanding.

Far beyond the reach of endless sky,  
Far below the depths of endless sea,  
Your love that has no end  
Enflames my heart again.  
(*Lm Duy Thien, translation: Zaragoza*)

We have much to learn from others. Kim’s story is every immigrant’s story. It is the story of the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, into a foreign land that promised safety for a time and a chance for young Jesus to live and grow. It is the story of the baby Moses being placed in a basket by his mother and sent out with a prayer of hope and complete trust in God. And, it is the story of the Exodus, the passage from bondage to at least a chance of freedom.

In sharing our music, we share our culture, and we share who we are.

**Give up your seat.** Drawing on the advice offered in James 2:1–7, bishops and deacons in the early church were admonished to find a place for the poor in the liturgical assembly, even giving up their own seat if no other were available. The late-fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions*, for example, admonish a deacon that “if a poor man, or someone from a poor family, or a stranger, approaches you, whether he be old or young, if there is no place for him, then the deacon shall wholeheartedly find a place for such a person” (Book II, Section VII, quoting the earlier *Didascalia Apostolorum*, probably written in Syria in the mid-third century).

Nothing speaks more of hospitality than letting your guests have the best seats or letting them choose a seat before you claim yours. This one action does more to define power in choir lofts than anything of which we might speak. We all yearn for the familiar. Imagine how the immigrant guest with barely any English must feel when he or she enters a choir loft and is watched by thirty sets of eyes belonging to people who already occupy “their own” seats. That’s intimidating to say the least and terrifying to many. It is incumbent on the one who occupies the seat—the residual place of power and control—to surrender the seat, in order that the stranger may be welcomed and the community might grow.

**Sing everything together.** This is the primary and founding principle of inculturation. Culture is defined by who is present at that moment in time. It makes no sense whatsoever to proclaim a reading in a foreign language if the only person who understands what is being proclaimed is the lector. The same holds true in music. It is patronizing and less than honest for everyone not to sing everything together all the time. There are no moments in liturgy for tokenist multiculturalism and the fragmentation that it brings. We do it all together and, in doing so, a new culture is defined. In singing texts and music that are new to us, we enter into new experiences, and we become something new.

## A Unique Opportunity

We musicians have more opportunities to build bridges than most others in the liturgical assembly. We occupy unique places in our communities. We hold power of which we’re not even aware. Let’s use our resources to build ownership and tear down the walls that imply possession. In the words of Tom Conry: “Let us long to be prophets and not court musicians.” Let us find and identify those who are without power, who so wish only to belong to the tribe, then welcome them in and allow God’s grace to transform not them but us.

